



Towards a Supernatural Propaganda. The DPRK Myth in the Movie *The Big-Game Hunter*

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Abstract

For a long time, the world thought that the collapse of the USSR in 1991 would lead to a similar outcome in North Korea. Although the Kim regime suffered harsh economic troubles, it was able to distance itself from communism without facing an ideological crisis and losing mass support. The same core political myths are still in use today. However, after the DPRK left the ideas of socialist realism behind, it has become clearer that the ideology of the country is a political religion. Now, its propaganda is using more supernatural elements than ever before. A good example is the movie *The Big-Game Hunter* (*Maengsu sanyangkkun*) in which the Japanese are trying to desacralize Paektu Mountain, but instead experience the fury of the holy mountain in the form of thunderbolts. The movie was produced in 2011 by P'yo Kwang, one of the most successful North Korean directors. It was filmed in the same year Kim Chŏng-ŭn came to power. The aim of the paper is to show the evolution of the DPRK political myth in North Korean cinema, in which *The Big-Game Hunter* seems to be another step in the process of mythologization. It is crucial to understand how the propaganda works, as it is still largely the cinema that shapes the attitudes and imagination of the people of the DPRK.

Keywords: North Korean cinema, political religion, myth, ideology, propaganda

Słowa kluczowe: kino Korei Północnej, mit polityczny, mit, ideologia, propaganda

Introduction

For an observer of North Korean cinema, one of the most fascinating things is how little has changed over time. Today, films are in color, the actors are less theatrical, and the camera moves more smoothly. In 2012, digital cameras were introduced into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and mostly replaced the film

stock 35mm standard. There has been technical progress in the industry. However, the plots remain almost the same as 70 years ago. This is intriguing when taking into account that the stability of the state has staggered many times throughout history: through the loss of the Korean War, the collapse of the regime's main sponsor (Soviet Union) in 1991, the death of the founder Kim Il-sŏng¹ (1994) and the succession of Kim Chŏng-il (2011), the great North Korean famine (1994–1998), and more recently, the harsh economic sanctions.

Despite various predictions,² the regime has remained in power with its dominant discourse almost untouched. For example, the first movie ever produced in the country, *My Home Village* (*Nae kohyang*), directed in 1949 by Kang Hong-sik and written by Kim Sung-gu, tells the story of a peasant who, unable to endure the atrocities on the part of Japanese invaders, joins the communist partisans. From them he learns about the great general Kim Il-sŏng who is going to bring salvation to all Koreans. The movie ends with the victory over the Japanese and a promise of a new era. *My Home Village* created a model screenplay for an entire film genre. Still today, DPRK partisan films are one of the most commonly produced genres. As Charles Armstrong emphasizes, the anti-Japanese struggle is the “foundational myth of the DPRK.”³ It corresponds to the social demand for the figure of an enemy, and it presents the arrival of a messiah. Even the last scenes of *My Home Village* show an archival display of the speech of the young Kim Il-sŏng. Thus, the anti-Japanese struggle myth justified the current political system. This strong link between the myth and the state, as Ernst Cassirer has warned,⁴ led to the establishment of a cinema of an exceptionally totalitarian and hermetic character.

However, there have been some slight changes in the narrative of political myth in cinema, especially during the last thirty years. The progressive deification of the leaders and the appearance of supernatural elements can be observed. Although much has been written on communism as a religious phenomenon,⁵ one might find a contradiction between the communist leader model in socialist realist aesthetics and the current image in North Korea, especially since the country still considers itself as an atheistic state and is hostile to organized religion, especially to Christianity.⁶

¹ In this text McCune'a-Reischauer Korean language Romanization systems is used.

² V. Cha, *The Impossible State. North Korea, Past and Future*, New York 2014, pp. 1–19.

³ C.K. Armstrong, *The Origins of North Korean Cinema: Art and Propaganda in the Democratic People's Republic*, “Acta Koreana” 2002, vol. 5, p. 10.

⁴ E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, London 1946.

⁵ For example: A.J. Klinghoffer, *Red Apocalypse: The Religious Evolution of Soviet Communism*, Maryland 1996; R. Imos, *Wiara człowieka radzieckiego*, Kraków 2007.

⁶ One must be aware of the ambiguous character of DPRK religious policy. There are churches in Pyongyang controlled by the state-run Chosŏn Christian Association. The organization even translated the Bible in 1983. These activities, however, have the character of a façade. Chŏng Sŏng-ku, *Sahoejuŭi kukka sogesŏui chonggyo: puk'anŭi kidokkyowa hyanghu sŏn'gyohwaltong panghyange kwanhan sarye yŏn'gu*, PhD dissertation, Kyonggi University, 1998, pp. 27–55. Access in: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.

Evolution of the mythological landscape

In general, Soviet art has been an important reference point for all North Koreans. During the postwar occupation (1945–1958), the Soviets supported the growth of the local cinema and Russian movies dominated the market completely. Many went to study film in Moscow.⁷ DPRK artists officially adopted patterns of socialist realism, known in Korea as *sahoejuŭijŏk sashilchuŭi*. Socialist realism became an official artistic method of the Soviet Union in 1934. It aimed to present “reality in its revolutionary development” and teach society the ways of socialism.⁸ In one respect it was a method of promoting ideological principles of Marxism and Leninism, and in another a means of control of the ruling party.⁹ There is no doubt that North Korea adopted the totalitarian aspect of the style, and parts of its aesthetics,¹⁰ but the extent of how much ideology it absorbed is a topic of discussion. While in Soviet cinema the influence of socialist realism declined after the death of Stalin, researchers still associate the cinema of the DPRK with it.¹¹ However, some differ in their assessments of the phenomenon.

Brian Reynolds Myers put forward a thesis that the principles of socialist realism were unsuccessful in North Korea. In *Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK* he argues that the main North Korean writers (and the DPRK’s Federation of Literature and Art which was connected to the film industry) referred to communism very superficially and instead “had returned to the ideals of a mythologized colonial past.”¹² According to Myers, it is hard to find something more contrary to Marxist discourse than the cult of the Korean race and the praise of naivety (*sobak ham*). Frank Hoffmann claims that North Korean aesthetics, especially initially, were a mixture of Soviet and Japanese colonial influences.¹³ Indeed, DPRK cinema includes many motifs, such as a mountain as the symbol of national identity, a leader of divine origin, the purity of the nation, and the readiness for suicide in battle which resembles the ideology of Imperial Japan. On the other hand, some scholars still consider North Korean art as just another form of socialist realism.¹⁴

⁷ C.K. Armstrong, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–14.

⁸ *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. Stenograficheskiĭ otchët*, “Sovetskiĭ pisatel” 1990, Moskva.

⁹ M. Flig, *Mitotwórcza funkcja kina i literatury w kulturze stalinowskiej lat 30. XX wieku*, Kraków 2014, pp. 54–63.

¹⁰ About socialist realism cinema esthetic see: T. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty*, Chorzów 2008, pp. 41–67; B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton 1992.

¹¹ See e.g., S. Chung, *Split Screen Korea Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema*, London 2014.

¹² B.R. Myers, *Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK*, New York 1994, p. 53.

¹³ F. Hoffmann, *Brush, Ink and Props. The Birth of Korean Painting*, [in:] *Exploring North Korean Arts*, R. Frank (ed.), Vienna 2010, pp. 150–155.

¹⁴ T. Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy*, Honolulu 2010, pp. 5–12.

The important thing to remember is that Koreans interpreted many communist ideas in their own way, and after the fall of the Soviet Union the regime was able to distance itself from communism altogether without losing credibility. In 1992, all references to Marxism and Leninism were removed from the constitution.¹⁵ In fact, the country no longer uses the word “communism” (*kongsanjuŭi*) and claims that its political system is a “Socialism of Our Own Version” (*urishik sahoejuŭi*).¹⁶ These actions strengthened rather than changed the extant national myths.

Emile Durkheim notes how power and holiness are closely related.¹⁷ After 1991, the exaltation of the leaders accelerated. The language of propaganda increasingly suggested miraculous and magical characteristics of both Kim Il-sŏng and Kim Chŏng-il.¹⁸ According to a high-ranking defector, Hwang Chang-yŏp, after the death of the Great Leader in 1994 the state media reported that white cranes (an animal very important in Korean mythology) came to mourn him and that his image suddenly appeared in the sky.¹⁹ As Polish sociologist Stefan Czarnowski points out, “Heroes are the dead elevated to divine dignity.”²⁰ In 1997, the government changed the calendar to *chuch’e* time (literally “subject time”) to begin counting the years from Kim Il-sŏng’s birth.²¹ “The tremendous event that occurred at the beginning of time” which constructs “the Cosmos” and “sacred history” as described by Mircea Eliade²² turns out to occur, for the DPRK, in the 20th century. A year later, the People’s Supreme Assembly gave the deceased leader the title of “president for all eternity,” and since then, no one else can hold the office of President.²³ In this way, Kim Il-sŏng shed his last human qualities and transformed into a mythical figure.

This trend of sacralization can be also observed in cinema. As the visual arts are great carriers of myths, they were a central task for the DPRK artists from the beginning. In the first years of the DPRK, Kim Il-sŏng was portrayed in cinema primarily

¹⁵ Ch’oe Yŏng-un, *Puk’an chŏngch’ŭi chonggyohwae taehan yŏn’gu*, PhD dissertation, Ewha Womans University, 2001, p. 27. Access in: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. One may find information about *chuch’e* (subject) as DPRK national ideology, but others see it just as a part of Kim Il-sŏng’s personality cult created in order to present the leader as an intellectual and theoretician, no worse than Mao. The authors do not consider *chuch’e* thought as a good tool for understanding DPRK cinema, as it is vague and hides the true intentions of filmmakers. See more: B.R. Myers, *North Korea’s Juche Myth*, Busan 2015.

¹⁶ Kim Kyong-dong, Lee On-jook, *The Two Koreas. Social Change and National Integration*, Seoul 2003, p. 334.

¹⁷ B. Gustafsson, *Durkheim on Power and Holiness*, [in:] *The Myth of the State*, H. Biezais (ed.), Uppsala 1972, pp. 20–30.

¹⁸ W.J. Dziak, *Korea Północna. U źródeł rodzinnej sukcesji władzy*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 285–286; R. Husarski, *Szamanizm Wielkiego Brata*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2016, nr 41, pp. 44–45.

¹⁹ Hwang Chang-yŏp, *Puk’anŭi in’gwŏnmunje*, <http://korea318.com/client/board/data/view.asp?sidx=134> [access: 1.10.2018].

²⁰ S. Czarnowski, *Kult bohaterów i jego społeczne podłoże. Święty Patryk, bohater narodowy Irlandii*, Warszawa 1956, pp. 17–25.

²¹ The current year would be “*chuch’e* 108.” See: V. Cha, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²² M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W.R. Trask, New York 1959, pp. VII–VIII.

²³ Kang Chol-hwan, P. Rigolot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in North Korean Gulags*, New York 2005, p. 7.

as a great general and liberator of the nation. He was rarely depicted on screen by an actor. Usually, as in *My Home Village*, propagandists use some archival documentary clips or photos. One of the few known attempts to portray the leader through an actor was in the ten-part movie *The Star of Korea* (*Chosŏnŭi pyŏl*, started in 1980, directed by Om Gil-son). The final episode was broadcast in 1987.²⁴ As it was characterized, with time, the image of the national hero began to expand. One of the foundations of mythological thinking is mystery.²⁵ When a leader becomes someone who is beyond human, the filmmakers completely refrain from portraying him on screen. Afterwards, the leader appears only in other, indirect ways. In the sacred story, the deeds of gods and heroes are a mystery.²⁶

The question for the directors was how to portray the leaders, to show that they are always present with the people. The characters in movies speak about Kim Il-sŏng in a sublime manner, they are moved by the sound of his name, and they can change their behaving just by hearing about his greatness. *Song of the East Sea* (*Tonghaeŭi nora*, 2009, the director is not credited) tells the story of the formative years of the Chongryon (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), an organization of North Koreans in Japan. The Koreans who are persecuted by the cruel Japanese are shown regaining hope from a letter received from Kim Il-sŏng himself. In another scene, the whole community loudly cries with emotion as a portrait of the commander is hung and anointed. In the movie *Bellflower* (*Toraji Kkot*, 1987, dir. Kyun Son-jo) a poor village receives a convoy of new tractors as a present from Kim Il-sŏng. Although he is physically absent, the leader is omnipresent.²⁷ He always knows what is best and provides for the people with love and care. To describe him, this propaganda uses the mother figure.²⁸ As Joseph Campbell unfolds the archetype of the mother in his famous book:

Human beings are born too soon; they are unfinished, unready as yet to meet the world. Consequently, their whole defense from a universe of dangers is the mother, under whose protection the intra-uterine period is prolonged [...]. Any prolonged absence of the parent causes tension in the infant and consequent impulses of aggression.²⁹

²⁴ According to North Korean film historian Johannes Schönherr: "The actor playing Kim is not named in the credits and is said to have undergone plastic surgery in order to look exactly like the young Kim. He's also said to have not been allowed to appear in any other film again;" J. Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema. A History*, North Carolina 2012, p. 65.

²⁵ A. Szyjewski, *Etnologia religii*, Kraków 2016, p. 88.

²⁶ M. Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, Paris 1987, pp. 84–85.

²⁷ Lee Hyang-jin analysis the movie from Marxism-*juche* perspective and finds "various contradictory messages undermining its surface text." Not surprising as the authors of the movie were guided by different ideology in the first place. See: Lee Hyang-jin, *Conflicting Working-Class Identities in North Korean Cinema*, "Korea Journal" 2000, vol. 40, no. 3, p. 249.

²⁸ It was widely described for the first time by Brian Reynolds Myers. Also Polish film theorist Jerzy Franczak notices feminine features in the DPRK cinema. He even calls the common plot narration as "erotic" – the entrance of a hero in to the ideological frames resembles the passion of lovers. B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race. How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters*, New York 2010, pp. 73–95; J. Franczak, *Drewniany język (O kinie Północnej Korei)*, "Nowe Nawigacje" 2003, vol. 2, p. 58.

²⁹ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New Jersey 2004, p. 36.

Foreigners seem to be a threat to this intimate relationship between the leader and the people. It should be remembered that even the Soviets and the Chinese, who contributed so much to the survival of the DPRK, are almost never mentioned in the cinema (in contrast, for example, with the Polish socialist realist cinema in which the Soviets are praised). In war movies, the Koreans usually fight by themselves under the general Kim Il-sŏng. However, the Great Leader is never depicted as someone who gives out orders on screen. He is more like a totem, a unifying symbol for the people.³⁰ The greatest act of heroism was depicted as a soldier dying in a suicide attack with the name of the commander on his lips (e.g., *My Happiness*, 1987, directed by Kim Yong-ho).

After the death of Kim Il-sŏng, his son's cult grew in a mysterious way. In the times of increasing lack of supplies, Kim Chŏng-il became associated with land, harvest and weather. Propaganda reported on various mysterious phenomena surrounding the Dear Leader. During a visit to the demilitarized zone in Panmunjom, he brought the fog to cover himself against American snipers, but when he reached the soldiers, the fog suddenly disappeared. He could repair a tractor door just by touching it, after which no one could ever open it again.³¹ He could bring out the sun for important meetings.³² These types of messages are also portrayed on screen. In the movie *Forever in Our Memory* (*Ch'uŏksoge yŏngwŏnhari*) directed by Kang Chung-mo in 1999, villagers and soldiers are struggling to cultivate the fields during a drought. In one sequence, an excited woman screams that the Dear General himself was approaching the village. All of the workers leave the field and run toward her in excitement. The next shot shows clouds of dust behind the car, disappearing on the horizon. The Koreans are so moved that they cry over the tracks of their beloved leader's car. The sequence finishes with a long shot of clouds, signalling the end of the drought.

For some scholars, both South Korean and from outside the peninsula, similar examples of propaganda were enough to deduce that in North Korea, the Kim dynasty is godlike, or resembling God.³³ Others warn against drawing conclusions too quickly and note that propaganda is usually not direct in making claims of divinity of the leaders. Brian Reynolds Myers, an expert on DPRK literature, even writes:

³⁰ This omniscience and omnipresence of the leader is similar to representations of Stalin in Soviet classics like *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padenie Berlina*, directed by Mikheil Chiaureli in 1950). Apart from the fact that Stalin is very masculine figure, he is also presented as a teacher and liberator of the nations, while Kim is presented in a purely nationalistic manner. He is more of a protector of the people, than the educator.

³¹ The tractor incident was probably inspired by Mikheil Chiaureli's documentary film *The Vow* (*Kliatva*, 1946). In the movie Stalin comes to the workers struggling with a broken tractor, and quickly identifies which part was damaged. The difference is that Stalin was portrayed as a genius and Kim as magician. See: *Anecdotes of Kim Jong Il's Life*, Pyongyang 2012, pp. 3–8.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ e.g., Kim Pyŏng-ro, *Puk'ansahoeŭi chonggyosŏng: chuch'esasangwa kidokkyoŭi chonggyoyangshik pigyo*, Seoul 2000, pp. 4–6; V. Cha, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

A significant difference is that while the Text likes to draw bemused attention to outsiders, including Americans and South Koreans, who allegedly regard Kim Il Sung as a divine being, it never makes such claims for him itself.³⁴

Although one could argue with this statement, considering some of the materials already known,³⁵ it is true that propaganda mostly uses suggestion and implication about the nature of the leaders. In *Forever in Our Memory*, the viewer cannot be certain if the sudden change in the disastrous weather is really the work of Kim Chŏng-il, even though the film's narrative implies it. However, a closer study of DPRK cinematic history reveals the process of the sacralization of the leaders. It appears that the movie *The Big-Game Hunter* (*Maengsu sanyangkkun*) takes this process a step further. In this film there are no understatements. To use Mircea Eliade's language the "sacred cosmos" of North Korea is manifest in the movie very clearly.

About the movie

The Big-Game Hunter was produced in 2011, the year of the transfer of power from Kim Chŏng-il, following his death, to his son, Kim Chŏng-ŭn. The movie was directed by P'yo Kwang, the former director of photography who specializes in historical cinema.³⁶ His movie, set in the Middle Ages about a Korean family defending the Dokdo Islands³⁷ from the Japanese and featuring the North Korean movie star Ri Yŏng-ho, *The Blood-Stained Route Map* (*P'imudŭn yakp'ae*) received recognition even in South Korea. Along with another P'yo Kwang movie, *The Spirit of Korean Celadon* (*Ch'ŏngjaŭi nŏk*, 2002), it was screened at the Jeonju International Film Festival at the Special Screening section in 2005. It was the second time in history that movies from the DPRK were screened to a South Korean audience – after *Souls Protest* (*sarainnŭn yŏnghondŭl*, 2000, directed by Kim Chun-song) which was shown in the South in 2003.³⁸ P'yo Kwang's greatest success was probably the movie *Pyongyang Nalpharam*, made in 2006. In this martial arts drama, once again starring Ri Yŏng-ho, the hero fights back against the Japanese and defends Korean independence. The DPRK state media reported that this movie was seen by six million people in the country.³⁹ *The Big-Game Hunter* was the director's tenth movie.⁴⁰ Considering

³⁴ B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race...*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³⁵ "In children's book Kim Il Sung becomes invisible, travel vast distances in a single night, and appears in two different places at the same time;" S.W. Linton, *Life after Death in North Korea*, [in:] *Korea Briefing. Toward Reunification*, D.R. McCann (ed.), London 1997, pp. 83–109.

³⁶ Yŏnghwajinhŭngwiwŏnhoe, *Han'gukyŏnghwayŏn 'gam*, Seoul 2012, pp. 439–440.

³⁷ The islands are subject to an international dispute between Korea and Japan.

³⁸ Chosun, 'tokto waegu kyŏkt'oe' puk'anyŏnghwa 'p'imudŭn yakp'ae' kungnae sangyŏng, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2005/04/12/2005041270173.html [access: 1.10.2018].

³⁹ J. Schönherr, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴⁰ It was recommended to this paper's author at the XIV Pyongyang Movie Festival by a shop clerk when he asked about contemporary film popular among Koreans.

P'yo Kwang's position and achievements, it can be said that he is probably the most powerful man in the DPRK cinema industry.

The Big-Game Hunter takes place during the colonial period, somewhere between 1936–1939. The action film is based on the presumably true story of the Japanese expeditions led by general Tomoyuki Yamashita which desecrated the mountains of Korea by hammering steel bars blessed by Shinto priests into the tops of the mountains. According to some, such activities were intended to assert the dominance of the Yamato race on the Korean Peninsula and squash the hopes for Korean independence. Presented as true history in the movie, the only factual part of the story is based on the real bars found in the mountains. Other scholars offer less mysterious explanations of their existence: e.g., they could have been put there for measuring the land, or for military use, such as building a temporary military base. However, such nuances would not serve the anti-Japanese myth.⁴¹

The main character, Kim Ko-sök, is a former soldier of the Korean Army which was disbanded in August 1907 as a result of a secret meeting between the Korean and Japanese governments after the abdication of the Korean Emperor, Ko Chong – although in the movie there is no information that most of the army was already disbanded after the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905.⁴² After losing the rebellion with the so-called Righteous Army (Ŭibyŏng) against the Japanese Army, he refuses to continue to fight. His wife's father commits suicide in despair (which may be a reference to the famous Korean officer Pak Se-han) and his son becomes ill. He moves with his family to live a simple life as a hunter. However, as the result of attempted rape by a Japanese landowner, his wife dies. She loses her life by jumping from a cliff while trying to escape her attacker. As a result, her ill son dies as well. Furious with revenge, Kim Ko-sök kills the Japanese landowner and his relatives except for his son Yoshiro, although he survives with one less ear. After escaping from the scene of the murder, Kim Ko-sök changes his name to Chun Pöm and hides in the mountains with his remaining children, Chin-hae and Chin-sök.

When his children grow up, Chun Pöm tries to find a husband for his daughter, Chin-hae. During a visit to the village, he is recognized by Yoshiro, now an Imperial Army officer, and arrested. The one-eared Japanese soldier wants to kill Kim Ko-sök but his superiors have different plans. The hunter is to guide a special expedition to the top of Mt. Paektu to desecrate the symbol of the Korean spirit, after which he would be killed. During the journey Chun Pöm comes to learn of their plans, and he prepares a trap. However, he fails, and his son is killed. He is forced to continue the march. In the final scenes, it turns out that the peak to which he took them is not Mt. Paektu, and the Japanese fall into an ambush of Korean guerrilla fighters who secretly followed behind Chun Pöm. The last scene shows the Japanese prisoners of

⁴¹ Kim Yong-sam, *Yöksabaroseugiwa panil söndong taemoshi toen soemalttung chinshirün?* (22.03.2016), <http://m.mediapen.com/news/view/129370> [access: 1.10.2018]; Kim Du-gyu, [Why] [kim-dugyu kyosuüi shweljmlinbt(kugunp'ungsu)] chosönüi jwimshin kkünüryödön jyöjn soemalttugüi tto tarün chinshil, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/09/27/2013092702422.html?Dep0=twitter&d=2013092702422 [access: 1.10.2018].

⁴² About this period learn more: E. Kim, *Japanese Rule in Korea (1905–1910): A Case Study*, "Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society" 1962, vol. 106, no. 1, pp. 53–59.

war surrendering their weapons to the Kim Il-sŏng partisans and the victorious Mt. Paektu.

Messiah, Holy Mountain, and the beasts

The Big-Game Hunter follows a type of plot typical of a North Korean partisan movie. The genre was popular throughout the Soviet bloc. However, even in the early years, the DPRK version differed from its counterparts in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Poland by the presence of the messianic archetype. One study, analyzing the figures of the leaders in several socialist realist movies from different countries, concluded that only in North Korea is the leader portrayed “like a demigod” with the attributes of omnipresence and omniscience. The difference was also seen in the attitude towards the leader. “Heroes die with the revolution and Kim Il Sung’s name on their lips while Soviet heroes only chant the *Internationale*.”⁴³

However, when classic DPRK movies show partisans announcing the coming of a great general and praising him, there remains ambiguity about his nature. In *The Big-Game Hunter* all doubts are dispelled. To use a term from structuralist analysis, the general’s *signifié* was transformed.⁴⁴ In three different scenes, Koreans pray together for the arrival of a great man. In the first instance, peasants pray towards the sky after the Japanese army burned and slaughtered their relatives. In the background a song is heard which says: “Stars are numerous in the vast sky, but no star shines for our nation.” As the propaganda expanded, Kim Il-sŏng began to be described not only as the sun, but also as a star, and even as *Hanullim*, the god from Korean folk mythology.⁴⁵ In numerous later scenes, heroes are seen looking up in despair, and in the next shot a bright star appears – an unmistakable harbinger of change. Partisans who ceased fighting due to a lack of leadership cry out to Mt. Paektu to answer them. Finally, Kim Ko-sŏk is seen praying in tears to the holy mountain, after killing the blasphemous Japanese, to send the nation a general who will restore the country. After this scene, viewers are shown a mountain surrounded by lightning. In a sublime tone, the narrator says that at long last the General of Mt. Paektu came and saved Korea. Even without appearing on the screen, Kim Il-sŏng is the hero of the movie. Kim Ko-sŏk, his family, and the partisans, precisely following one of Vladimir Propp’s rules presented in *Morphology of the Folktale*, are secondary heroes whose function is to give proper meaning to the hero myth, and the leader himself acts as a *deus ex machina*.⁴⁶

Supernatural elements are present throughout the movie in various ways. The Japanese decide to carry out the desecrating rituals on Mt. Paektu because they came to the conclusion that the spirit of the Korean struggle exists only because of the power of the mountain. The Japanese are afraid of the prophecy. They conclude that

⁴³ J. Mahuzier, *Exploring Partisan Myth in Totalitarian Cinema*, PhD dissertation, Seoul National University, 2013, p. 96. Access in: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.

⁴⁴ M. Czeremski, *Struktura mitów. W stronę metonimii*, Kraków 2009, pp. 72–84.

⁴⁵ Ch’oe Yŏng-un, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁶ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin 1968, pp. 71–78.

the strange weather phenomena in the mountains means something is amiss. The viewer learns that the Koreans regard it as the “spirit of a savior given by Mt. Paektu” and believe that this person will surely destroy the Japanese. The colonial forces must do something about it, so they arm the expedition with magical artifacts – steel which has particles from the sword given by the major Shinto goddess, Amaterasu, to the nation of Japan. In another scene, as the expedition is approaching the top of the mountain, thunder and lightning appear. The expedition is terrified. One of the Japanese soldiers tries to charge toward the peak and dies momentarily from a thunderbolt. Chun Põm explains that it is because of disrespect. To survive, they must proceed with respect and bow to all the “mysterious peaks.”

There are also some scenes which represent “the spirit of the nation.” In these scenes, the first-person camera moves quickly through the forest, showing dead Japanese soldiers and presenting Mt. Paektu from a bird’s eye point of view. Although this might be considered only an aesthetic technique, it is unusual of most typical DPRK movies and socialist realist cinema, which typically avoided overcomplication of narration in its attempts to be clear enough to be understood by every worker and peasant.

It must be noted that Mt. Paektu has been present in movies from the beginning of North Korean cinema. The mountain became a logo for the first DPRK movie production. It functioned as a symbol of national identity and an important, symbolic landmark. In propaganda the Kim dynasty is also strongly connected to this mountain.⁴⁷ In a classic propaganda text, Kim Il-sõng leads his partisan campaign from it, and Kim Chõng-il was born at the foot of it. In *The Big-Game Hunter*, another language shift is noticed. Mt. Paektu undergoes personification. According to Stewart Guthrie, if one essential quality for religion must be chosen, it would be anthropomorphization.⁴⁸ Mt. Paektu seems to be a mountain who can send a hero, kill those who disrespect it and “any provoker against this ancestral mountain [...] will never escape the merciless punishment of Mt. Paektu” as the narrator proclaims at the end of the movie. Prior to this, the mountain had never been personified this way in cinema.

While there is anthropomorphization, the movie also offers some examples of the process of dehumanization the movie. The denial of humanity to the “stranger” has been a common practice in traditional societies. Andrzej Szyjewski writes:

From their point of view, the world is divided into “real people” – that is, members of their own tribe – who speak as “humans” or in a given language, and animals and monsters who in a more or less successful way imitate real people. Humans are always us, never them.⁴⁹

This tribal thinking is the best way to describe the mentality presented on the screen. While DPRK propaganda has dehumanized foreigners from the beginning,

⁴⁷ About symbolic function of Mt. Paektu in DPRK read: R. Winstanley-Chesters, V. Ten, *New Goddesses at Paektu Mountain: Two Contemporary Korean Myths*, “S/N Korean Humanities” 2016, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 151–179.

⁴⁸ S. Guthrie, *A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, “Current Anthropology” 1980, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 182.

⁴⁹ A. Szyjewski, *op. cit.*, p. 63 (translated by R.H.).

the way it is done in *The Big-Game Hunter* is worth noting. The main characters are hunters. Interestingly, they do not distinguish between the animals they kill and the Japanese. Under interrogation about killing the landlord's family, Kim Ko-sök proudly answers: "I killed a beast, not a man." In another scene, in which one partisan is taking his gun and preparing to leave his house, he quiets his wife by arguing that he is only leaving to "go hunting." There is also one hero who was saved by a Japanese person from freezing to death, and it is evident that this contact with strangers has caused him to lose his "Koreanness." He is nervous and petty and puts the other characters in danger. Finally, he realizes how naïve he was to trust a Japanese person. To purify himself, he kills his former savior and calls him the devil. The propaganda is clear: foreigners can never be trusted.

This dichotomy is also emphasized by contact with nature. Koreans have a special relationship with the land. They feel confident in forests. Tiredness can never be seen on their faces. Chin-hae is depicted as pure: she is happy and innocent even after hunting a bear which wounded her. In contrast, the Japanese are clumsy, weak, and fearful – one of them at night mistook Chin-sök to be a ghost. It can be also read as another anthropomorphization that the land of Korea itself rejected the foreigner invaders. The differences between the two nations are also emphasized through their appearance. Most of the Japanese have some physical defect. One of them is missing an ear, others are wrinkled, and some wear glasses or wigs. Koreans, on the other hand, stand upright, are well-built and with their round faces are perfect examples of the "pure race." It should also be pointed out that the English title was softened, probably intentionally, by the Koreans. The direct translation of *Maengsu sanyangkun* is "Beast Hunter," and in that way the characters describe the Japanese.

Conclusion

Myths, especially political myths as Ernst Cassirer warned, are dangerous weapons in the hands of the state. According to the philosopher, myth has the potential for rapid expansion. By using manipulations in the semantic field, it transforms language, ethical values, and meanings. It can do so imperceptibly through the help of arousing political passions.⁵⁰ This is why strong emotions are at the center of *The Big-Game Hunter*. Through emotional manipulation the viewer easily accepts changes to the mythical worldview, and new aspects of the political myths smoothly become part of a newly built whole.

Regardless of whether one agrees on the socialist realist roots of DPRK cinematography or not, *The Big-Game Hunter* has nothing to do with them. Elements such as a living mountain, praying characters, prophecies, magic rituals, and race-orientated thought are way beyond the aesthetics of socialist realism. Rather than a story about class maturation, we are presented with the myth of the hero. Paradoxically, with the nation's slow opening to the outside world, instead of a history that would attempt

⁵⁰ E. Cassirer, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–190.

to adapt to global conditions, a progressive mythologization is developing. It might be seen as a weakness of the regime and a result of an identity crisis. For old communists, such as Hwang Chang-yŏp, the supernatural elements in propaganda which came about after the death of Kim Il-sŏng were shocking.⁵¹ However, one might argue that in fact, by creating more sacred and supernatural structures around the regime, its survival was aided. The different testimonies show that, at least partly, this transition was successful. Although defectors differ in their views on the nature of their former leader, it is common in the country to attribute divine powers to leaders – even recently the author of this paper heard such a claim from one of the defectors.

Some scholars argue that this “alternative” to main discourse will lead to a serious weakening of the regime and a massive loss of trust in it. As early as in 2007, Andrei Lankov warned that the increasingly widespread access to South Korean movies on DVD “does not bode well for the regime’s future.”⁵² Instead, the dictatorship during the rule of Kim Chŏng-ŭn is as strong as ever and there is no sign of a rapidly approaching fall. The rigid and sacred frames of North Korean cinema put them into a different category than films from the outside world. DPRK cinematography belongs to the sacred arts. It is a carrier of national myths. To echo Ernst Cassirer again, words in the hands of the state can be as dangerous as weapons of mass destruction.

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⁵¹ Hwang Chang-yŏp, *op. cit.*

⁵² A. Lankov, *North of the DMZ. Essays on Daily Life in North Korea*, London 2007, p. 553.

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